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SUBJECT: LEBANON: NEA A/S WELCH AND DAPNSA ABRAMS URGE

MARCH 14 CHRISTIAN UNITY

Classified By: Ambassador William Grant for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Former President and Phalange leader Amine Gemayel hosted a December 19 luncheon for visiting NEA Assistant Secretary David Welch and Deputy Assistant to the President

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and Deputy National Security Advisor (DAPNSA) Elliott Abrams, attended by a strong showing of March 14 Christian leaders or their representatives. Gemayel met separately with Welch and Abrams to make an appeal for "support with muscles" from the U.S. to counter Iranian and Syrian support to the opposition.

Gemayel also said that he has not yet accepted PM Siniora's invitation that he join the cabinet to replace his slain son Pierre; he is considering designating someone from his party instead. Welch and Abrams assured Gemayel and the larger group of unfaltering U.S. support for Lebanon and called for March 14 unity, discipline, and purpose.

¶2. (C) Offering different opinions for how to proceed, most of the group remained committed to electing Lebanese Armed Forces Commander Michel Sleiman as president by December 31. Participants appealed for stronger U.S. support and explored how the U.S. can pressure Syria further. If the presidential vacuum persists after December 31, they would weigh their options, focusing on bolstering Prime Minister Fouad Siniora's government, and tabling electing a president with a half plus one majority as a "last resort option." End summary.

GEMAYEL HOSTS KEY MARCH 14 CHRISTIANS

¶3. (C) Former President and Phalange leader Amine Gemayel hosted a luncheon for visiting NEA Assistant Secretary David Welch and Deputy Assistant to the President and Deputy National Security Advisor (DAPNSA) Elliott Abrams on December 19, attended by all of the Christian leaders of March 14 or their representatives. Attendees included: Nassib Lahoud, Boutros Harb, Dory Chamoun, Ghattas Khoury (representing majority leader Saad Hariri), Antoine Zahara and Elie Khoury (representing Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea), Michel Mouawad (representing his mother MP Nayla Mouawad), Carlos Edde, Michel Khoury, Samir Franjeh, Bishop Elias Audi, Fares Souaid, and Michel Khattaf. Charge Bill Grant, Pol/Econ Chief, and PolStaff were also present.

ONE-ON-ONE: GEMAYEL NAMES

AOUN AND BERRI AS OBSTRUCTIONISTS

¶14. (C) Gemayel opened the afternoon with a tete-a-tete with Welch, Abrams, and Charge. Gemayel wanted to hear about the U.S. delegation's earlier meeting with Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri, and used the opportunity to denounce Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun's obstructionist tendencies. Welch assured Gemayel that the U.S. supports the majority and has issues with Aoun because of his Memorandum of Understanding with Hizballah, adding that while the U.S. does not isolate Aoun (the Ambassador meets with him), A/S Welch will not meet Aoun or contact him during this trip. Berri also is obstructing the elections, Gemayel continued, noting that Berri's position has changed, since he used to say that it is the responsibility of the majority to name the president.

MARCH 14 NEEDS "SUPPORT WITH MUSCLES"

¶15. (C) Arguing that March 14 has acted as a responsible alliance should, Gemayel said its members have done their homework by committing to shared principles and have paid a heavy price (referring to the series of assassinations targeted at March 14 politicians). He added that March 14 retreated from its desire to elect Nassib Lahoud or Boutros Harb as president, then retreated again by agreeing on Lebanese Armed Forces Commander Michel Sleiman and the requisite constitutional amendment. Citing past accomplishments, such as the Special Tribunal to investigate former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri's assassination and Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon, Gemayel lamented March 14's current backtracking, saying it is costing them public support.

¶16. (C) In spite of our labors, he continued, we still face opposition from Hizballah, which has financial, military, and

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political support from Iran, and political support from Syria. Hizballah can provoke street fighting and can topple Prime Minister Fouad Siniora's government through more assassinations. He concluded, "We don't feel the same support from the free world (singling out the U.S., France, and the Arab states). We need support with muscles." Without such support, Gemayel warned, the Iranians will take over, starting with the presidency and then with legislative elections in spring 2009. The presidency is critical, appealed Gemayel, and if March 14 doesn't succeed, it will lose everything, in particular the UN Security Council resolutions.

WELCH AND ABRAMS ASSERT UNFALTERING U.S. SUPPORT

¶17. (C) A/S Welch assured Gemayel that the U.S. considers Lebanon a "good friend," and that it does not have to fear losing U.S. support. Noting that there already is a division in the Maronite community, with Aoun on one side and those from March 14 gathered at the lunch on the other, Welch implored March 14 to act with unity, discipline, and purpose. He added that the U.S. will not make decisions for March 14; it is entirely their choice how to proceed.

¶18. (C) Transitioning into the larger meeting, Welch told the March 14 Christian participants that the U.S. regards Lebanon as a symbol of freedom, pluralism, and opportunity, in a region plagued by many troubles. Repeating his message of support, Welch added that Lebanon's identity is defined in part by the role of the Maronite community, and, given that the highest office is designated for the Maronites, the presidential election impasse must be resolved immediately.

¶19. (C) Welch said the U.S. does not harbor any illusions about who is obstructing the election. DAPNSA Abrams noted

he saw fewer and fewer illusions at the Ministerial on Lebanon in Paris the day before, adding that the French had learned the hard way about making a deal with Syria. Abrams reiterated U.S. support, saying that the fate of the Christian community is of particular importance to the U.S. and to the future of Lebanon.

DIFFERING OPINIONS ON
SLEIMAN'S CANDIDACY

¶10. (C) The first to speak in the group meeting, former MP Nassib Lahoud said March 14 is committed to electing a new president and is serious in its support for Sleiman. March 14 paid a price in supporting Sleiman, remarked Lahoud, but will pay a bigger price if it abandons Sleiman now. Adding that the opposition believes time is on its side, Lahoud suggested reversing this perception, forcing the opposition to take action now. Former MP Fares Souaid mentioned that their decision to elect Sleiman secured army support for March 14.

¶11. (C) Carlos Edde, leader of the National Bloc and self-proclaimed "dissident voice" in the group, objected, saying, "One day we woke up and Syria's first choice all of the sudden became March 14's first choice." He did not approve of politicizing the army and making it choose between the majority and opposition, suggesting that the election of Sleiman sends the message to future army commanders that they, too, could be president.

U.S. SUPPORT CAN LEVEL
THE PLAYING FIELD

¶12. (C) MP Boutros Harb countered that the issue is not the candidate, but instead Hizballah's and Syria's long term goal to change the Taif agreement. Acknowledging U.S. support, he asserted that it is no match for Iranian and Syrian backing and there is an imbalance in the struggle between the majority and the opposition. Dory Chamoun, head of National Liberal Party, suggested that the U.S. treat Syria as a renegade state and take actions such as an air blockade to cripple Syria. Believing that discussions on passing UN resolutions and imposing sanctions can have a large impact because Syria fears the unknown (even if no action is taken), Ghattas Khoury, advisor to Saad Hariri, advocated raising the level of discourse on sanctions.

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¶13. (C) Highlighting U.S. military aid to Lebanon and noting that U.S. economic sanctions against Syria are unable to have a harsh impact, Abrams said that the Gulf could contribute financial support to Lebanon and could diminish the flow of money to Syria. He remarked that EU countries could impose formidable sanctions, but that the U.S. has not yet been able to convince them to take action. Absent UN Security Council resolutions, he said, it is difficult to get the Europeans on board. A/S Welch added that the U.S. lacks the carrots and sticks needed to pressure Syria.

DIFFERING VIEWS IN MARCH 14

¶14. (C) Gemayel pointed out that March 14 will face new threats, not only more assassinations, but also civil disobedience, after December 31, when the legislative session recesses until mid-March. The reaction will be the same to either electing a president with a half plus one majority or to bolstering the Siniora government, Antoine Zahara predicted, and pressed the participants to try to elect a president by December 31. Souaid submitted that March 14 cannot elect a president with a half plus one majority without international support. In an attempt to refocus the discussion on how to pressure Syria, Ghattas Khoury deemed

electing a president with a half plus one majority a "last resort option," and reminded everyone that electing Sleiman was still the priority. Welch observed that there was not 100 percent agreement among March 14 on the course of action.

BOLSTERING THE SINIORA GOVERNMENT

¶15. (C) Raising the possibility that Sleiman could renounce his candidacy and March 14 would be unable to elect him as president, Nassib Lahoud explored how the Siniora government should proceed. He advocated that the government make minor, popular decisions for the public good, and refrain from anything controversial; for example, he recommended giving bonuses to the army but not levying any taxes or raising prices. The opposition will use any excuse to provoke social unrest, he warned. Drawing attention to the government's financial issues, Lahoud indicated the need for the Saudi government to deposit billions of dollars into the Siniora government's account. Welch agreed these measures were necessary, but not sufficient, and March 14 needs to send the message that a president must be elected now.

IF VACUUM PERSISTS,
GOVERNMENT SHOULD ACT

¶16. (C) Michel Mouawad, son of MP and Social Affairs Minister Nayla Mouawad, recommended implementing an initiative to resolve an issue with displaced Christians from the civil war residing in Mount Lebanon. The participants briefly mentioned other possible initiatives, including securing approval to open a second branch of the Lebanese University. Such initiatives discussed aimed at strengthening the image of the government.

APPRECIATION FOR U.S. INVOLVEMENT

¶17. (C) Ghattas Khoury angrily denounced French efforts, saying "We are not Bulgarian nurses!" and expressed appreciation for the high-level U.S. visit. He added that Syrian president Bashar Assad is choosing Lebanon's president "because of the stupid French initiative that didn't have March 14 agreement."

¶18. (U) This cable has not been cleared by A/S Welch.

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